



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2015

Gender Equality in Death? The Normative Dimension of Roman Catholic Ossuaries

Höpflinger, Anna-Katharina

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-115297>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Höpflinger, Anna-Katharina (2015). Gender Equality in Death? The Normative Dimension of Roman Catholic Ossuaries. *Religion and Gender*, 5(1):18-34.

Gender Equality in Death? The Normative Dimension of Roman Catholic Ossuaries

ANNA-KATHARINA HÖPFLINGER*

Abstract

Gender seems to be so important for social orientation that it does not end with death, but forms practices and ideas around death. In Roman Catholic regions across Europe we find charnel houses and ossuaries, where the bones of the deceased have been collected. The exposed mortal remains reminded the living of death and warned them to live a 'good' life. To explain the interrelation between such normative demands and the material representation of death, a gender-based perspective is useful: in their material representations, ossuaries offer gendered ideas of death. For example we find murals of masculine and feminine personifications of death as the Reaper. But ossuaries also posit the ungendered equality of all humans in death: girls, boys, women and men are nothing more than bones, arranged side by side. I argue that ossuaries can be understood as in-between spaces for gender concepts: they support a gendered social order, but they also blur gender differences.

Keywords

Death and gender; normativity; material religion; ossuaries; Christianity; European history of religion.

Author affiliation

Anna-Katharina Höpflinger is a research assistant and lecturer at the Centre for Religion, Economy and Politics (ZRWP) at the University of Zurich. After completing her PhD in the study of religion, she has realised different research projects in the field of media and religion, particularly focusing on body, clothing and gender. She also is interested in religions in the ancient world and in European history.

*Correspondence: Zentrum für Religion, Wirtschaft und Politik, Kantonsschulstrasse 1, CH-8001 Zürich, Switzerland. E-mail: a.hoepflinger@access.uzh.ch.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License (3.0)

Religion and Gender | ISSN: 1878-5417 | www.religionandgender.org | Uopen Journals

Introduction: Interrelations between Death and Gender

In this article, I investigate the relationship between gender, death and materially communicated processes of normativity, using the example of charnel houses from Central Europe, especially Switzerland. These chapels stage death in different ways. A gender-sensitive perspective is useful for their analysis, particularly in order to explain the visually and materially transmitted normative relevance of death for the formation of expectations of masculinity and femininity. I begin with some observations on the possible interrelations of gender and death. After some methodological remarks, I analyse ossuaries with regard to the interrelation of gender, death and visually and materially communicated normativity. Because concepts of gender and death interact with ideas of the body (McGuire 1990: 284), I begin with a brief reflection on the relationship between death, gender and the body.

For a contemporary 'western'¹ populace, death is first and foremost a phenomenon related to the body. It is often defined in relation to life, for instance as the end of it (Koudounaris 2011: 11). In such secular, western definitions, death is characterised by the category of absence (Orsi 2007): absence of brain functions, absence of life, absence of the person, and so on. In these concepts, death has biological, but also social implications. Since the late 19th and beginning of the 20th century, scientists from different fields have stressed the social basis for death (see Hertz 1905/1906) and discussed the relation between physical and social death. On the one hand, people can be socially dead before they are biologically deceased (Sudnow 1973: 96–98), for example, if they are critically ill or dement and are, as a result, detached from society. Orlando Patterson argues that persons without social status, such as slaves, can be defined as socially dead (Patterson 1982), whereas Erving Goffman proposes the category 'civil death' as a specific form of social death, characterised by the reduction or loss of political, economic, social and private possibilities, such as in the case of inmates of prisons or psychiatric clinics (Goffman 2006).

On the other hand, even in contemporary western cultures people can be biologically dead, but still socially alive. We all know that Elvis is 'alive and well'. Another example is the British philosopher and jurist Jeremy Bentham, the spiritual father (but not founder) of the University College of London. He ordered his body to be mummified after his death in 1832, and to this day, he is not only socially, but also physically still present at the University College of London.² Rumour has it that Bentham's mummy regularly attends meetings of the College Council. This may be a myth, but it shows that the idea of a life after death can work even without a religious³ foundation. These examples show that definitions of death depend on specific perspectives: a medical definition varies considerably from a religious one, and both are culture- and time-specific (for

¹ Here, 'western' is understood not in a geographical sense, but as a specific way of living and thinking that is connected with contemporary, democratic, secular, and late-capitalist concepts.

² See http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/who/bentham_ucl and for the mummy <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/who/autoicon>, both accessed 23 September 2014.

³ I define 'religion' in the following in a narrow sense as historical traditions developed in order to cope with questions of transcendence.

the changing interpretation of death in medicine, see Kahl 2014). Death can be interrelated with biological functions *and* with a wide range of social understandings and practices. Moreover, death understood in this sense is not merely the absence of something, but in fact the concepts of death are established in-between absence and presence, biological aspects and social practices.

Social practices and biological functions are also widely linked to ideas of gender. Gendered concepts seem to be at the basis of western societies, as Ursula LeGuin postulates with her famous quotation that a non-gendered society is 'almost impossible for our imagination to accept. What is the first question we ask about a newborn baby?' (LeGuin 2007 [1969: 85]). If we define gender as the social formation of biological possibilities, we can also assume that death (as the social interpretation of biological processes) and gender could be interrelated (Schroer 2014). A look at historical and contemporary practices around death confirms this hypothesis: Jeremy Bentham, for example, is still thought of as male and is represented as a man – even after his biological death. Thus, death does not actually mean the total absence of gender, but is in fact a gendered concept on different levels. Here, I differentiate between three such levels of interrelation between death and gender as a heuristic model for the understanding of European societies.

First, we can find an interrelation between gender and death on a socio-demographic level. Causes of death can be gender-specific; in historical times, women died in childbed, whereas men were more likely to die on battlefields or on ships. In late-industrial societies, we find a gender-gap regarding life expectancy. As socio-demographic studies have shown, women statistically live longer than men. This seems to be based, *inter alia*, on different lifestyles, as especially in traditional roles, masculinity is characterised by more rivalry and a less healthy lifestyle with greater physical risk (Feldmann 1997: 49). Connected to these traditional expectations towards masculinity and femininity, there are gendered differences regarding suicidal tendencies and types of suicide (O'Connor and Sheehy 1997). Thus, on the socio-demographic level, we discover intersections between gender, mortality rates, practices around death, tradition, social norms and expectations, age and ethnicity (with differences between industrialised and non-industrialised societies, see Feldmann 1997: 50).

Second, socially acquired practices around death and the deceased are gendered. Burial practices and mourning periods, as well as assigned tasks during the funeral rites were gender-specific throughout European history (for descriptions of practices around death in rural Lucerne in the 1920s, see Zihlmann 1982). For example, professional mourners were generally female, but coffin bearers often male; a widow in the 19th century had to mourn much longer for a deceased husband than a widower for his deceased wife (Hoefer 2010; Taylor 1983: 302–304). Also, the dead body itself has been seen as a gendered entity. For instance, since the late 19th century, corpses have been dressed in special burial gowns that to this day exist in feminine and masculine versions.⁴ Alternatively, people have often been buried in their (gendered) Sunday best or their

⁴ See for example the burial gowns for men and women on <https://www.ritabarber.com/> or <http://www.urnesa.ch/sortiment/bestattungswaesche/index.php>, both accessed 17 August 2014.

wedding gown/suit (Zihlmann 1982: 41–42; Hauser 1994: 127, fig. 117; 210–211, fig. 205–207). Thus, the dead body is still represented as gendered.

Third, death is also gendered on a conceptual level. Personifications of death can be gender-neutral, but often death has been imagined and represented as a man or woman, without any relation to the grammatical gender of words for 'death', as Karl S. Guthke has convincingly shown: *la mort* (French, grammatically feminine) can be depicted as masculine, and *der Tod* (German, grammatically masculine) as feminine (Guthke 1997). The personification of death as a man is especially prominent in the popular iconographic motif of 'Death and the maiden', which is obviously based on a heterosexual matrix (Guthke 1997: 94–143): a corpse or skeleton embraces or attacks (or even rapes) a young beautiful woman. This motif is highly sexualised, the young woman is often naked with death approaching her in a lewd manner, for instance groping her breasts (Guthke 1997: 119–120, fig. 26–27). However death is also often visualised as a woman or as a couple. In Figure 1 for instance, an 18th-century mural on the outside of the ossuary of Cevio (Ticino, Switzerland), shows death personified as a female and a male Grim Reaper. The trunks of both figures are clothed in typically rich Rococo dresses, while their legs and arms (but not heads) are skeletal. Here, death is represented as typically fashionable persons of that time, symbolising *vanitas*, the mortality of every person.

Gendered personifications of death are also part of the so-called *danse macabre* motif. Figures of death dance with persons symbolising different social ranks and professions. Sometimes, personified death is represented as a complement or as an antagonist to the human figure, as in Figure 2, a copy of the famous *danse macabre* of Basel (1439/40) (Egger 2009). The personified death dancing with the queen (on the right) has hanging breasts, while the one dancing with the king (on the left) seems to be represented as a man.

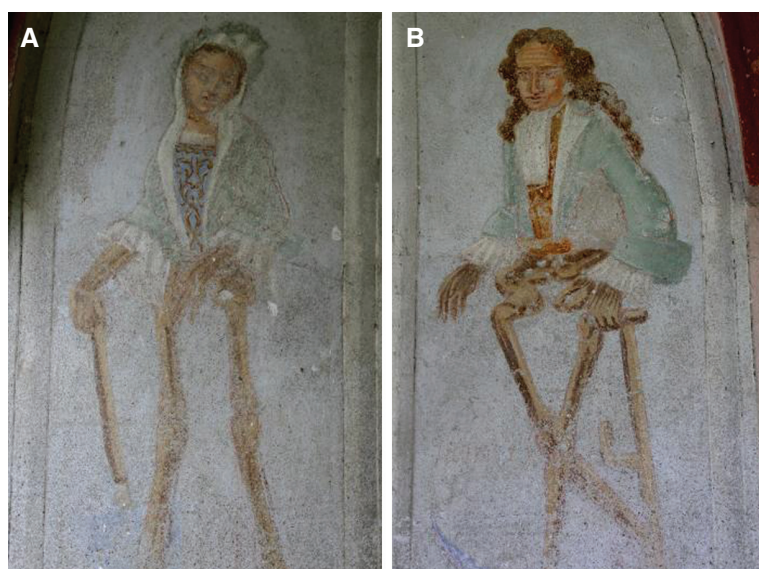


Figure 1: (A and B) Rococo female (left) and male Reaper, mural, 18th century, ossuary of Cevio, Ticino, Switzerland. © Yves Müller.



Figure 2: Watercolour copy of the *danse macabre* of Bale, 1806, Johann Rudolf Feyerabend. The original was from the 15th century, painted on a wall and taken down in the year 1805.

As these examples have shown, not only are the staging of the dead body and social practices around death gendered, but also the conceptions of death. Death as something uncontrollable (Stolz 2001: 33) is conceptually formed on the matrix of (gendered) conventions and social behaviour. This formation is, not just in regards to gender, a normative one. Unto this day regulations control the interrelation with the dead on the one hand and establish norms for the living in view of their own death on the other. One example are the norms concerning the handling of the dead body, which often depend on how a person died (the body of a murder victim is subordinated to other juridical regulations than the body of a 100-year old person who died of cardiac arrest in hospital), on one's affective relationship with the deceased and the economic status of the relatives. Death has also been linked to norms regarding life before death, especially in regards to conceptions of a good, correct life (such as morality, sociality, gender-appropriate behaviour and religious proficiency). Visual and material media seem to be one prominent form to transmit such regulations referring to death, as we have already seen with the *memento mori* motifs of Figures 1 and 2. The prospect of death correlates with expectations towards life. Concepts of death, including visually represented ones, espouse ideas of a 'good' life (ending in a 'good' death).⁵

What is then the function of these material and visual representations of death on the normative level for the formation and transmission of gender roles? In this respect we define normativity not as a stable concept, but as a dynamic process (Gilhus 2011). Material and visual objects play an important role in representing and transmitting values, norms and rules. I use normativity in the sense of a culturally dominant process that shapes and regulates ideas of being, hierarchies, and community, and not in the sense of an explicit order, legal system or instructions. In this sense, normativity can be defined as an important bonding force for socio-cultural processes by forming and regulating individual

⁵ What a 'good' death means is again era- and culture-specific. Today, most people prefer a painless and quick death (Feldmann 1997: 90–100), while in Europe up until the beginning of the 20th century a sudden death was considered problematic, and preparation for death was considered very important (Zihlmann 1982: 13–16).

and collective worldviews and actions. Normativity is era- and culture-specific: each society and group has their own dominant values and norms, they are often not written down as laws, but transmitted via various media (images, sounds, body, clothing and so on) and form specific traditions. Consequently, normativity is related to the creation of traditions (Jansen and Oestman 2011) and to processes of mediation.

Reflections on Methodology

In ossuaries death is represented and regulated on a material level; this article uses a cultural-studies approach to approximate this aspect of 'material religion' (Morgan 2010). The data used for this article was acquired in a project I conducted with the photographer Yves Müller. In 2013 and 2014, we visited 155 charnel houses in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Italy and France, of which we selected 49 that still display human bones for in-depth analysis. Yves Müller took photographs, while I analysed the chapels according to the categories of the circuit of culture (Du Gay et al. 1997). The circuit of culture is a methodological approach to structure the understanding of meaning-making processes in culture. This method was implemented by Stuart Hall, Paul Du Gay, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay and Keith Negus at the Open University London in 1997 and tested in a case study of the Sony Walkman. The scholars proposed a differentiation between five distinct, yet interrelated processes of cultural meaning making: representation, identity, regulation, production and consumption. In the following, I focus on the relationship between representation and regulation. 'Representation' here refers to the ossuary itself and the meaning-making processes that are communicated on the material level of the artefacts. The term 'regulation' relates to normative processes connected to the ossuary.⁶ Hence, in the following I concentrate on the interrelation between the representation of the material and normative regulations that the artefacts and images communicate. Yves Müller's photographs are an important part of the material religion approach and have been the topic of many a lively discussion between the two of us. They reflect ossuaries in a different but equally selective way as the literary level and have to be understood as visual parts of the argument. They are neither simple illustrations of my thoughts, nor unquestionable empirical truth.

For the purposes of this article, I limit myself to the material 'product' (and do not take into account the producers or the recipients) and the norms that we can cull from the images or artefacts themselves (Rose 2012: 21; 27–29). Consequently the focus is on the interior of the ossuaries as material representations of concepts of death. It is important to keep in mind that the composition and meaning of, and practices associated with, these material objects (the arrangement of skulls and bones, crosses, statues, altarpieces, murals, inscription plates, votive offerings, catafalques, etc.) change as time goes on. The starting point will be the artefacts as they present themselves today. Thus, my view and Müller's

⁶ In this case, 'production' regards the questions of how, when and by whom the chapels were built and decorated, and 'consumption' the use and reception of the chapels; 'identity' relates to different processes of belonging (to the Roman Catholic Church, to the dead, etc.) and demarcations.

pictures are contemporary. The historical assumptions are reconstructed, as far as possible on the basis of the material products themselves. This is important because gender norms (communicated via ossuaries) are not written down as 'laws', but they are communicated visually and sometimes implicitly, and have to be reconstructed based on the background of their specific time and the meaning of the ossuaries.

Historical Contextualisation of Ossuaries

Ossuaries have been known since at least the 9th century. In the Middle Ages, they were mostly built because only limited space was available on graveyards (Koudounaris 2011: 19–23). Medieval burial grounds were situated near the church due to religious reasons, so that the deceased would remain on sacred ground and be close to the saints who would intercede on behalf of the so-called poor souls in purgatory and at the Last Judgement. To enable redemption and bodily resurrection, the dead bodies had to be buried intact and should not be cremated or destroyed. However, medieval cemeteries had nothing in common with our contemporary, neatly arranged burial grounds. On the contrary, they were chaotic sites on which most of the tombs were arranged wildly and without markers such as gravestones or crosses (Sörries 2005: 28–32). The corpses were not always buried very deeply, so that rain and storms would wash bones out of the ground.⁷ In addition, because grave diggers did not possess a chart of previous burial places, new graves were sometimes dug randomly and at the risk of digging up already buried remains (Sörries 2005: 26). Any bones that were uncovered, as well as the ones that washed out, were not destroyed, but collected in ossuaries built on the graveyard or directly next to the church. As an overview of different charnel houses in Central Europe shows, they were first and foremost built for pragmatic purposes (Koudounaris 2011). We can find some geographically different architectural specificities of ossuaries (see Westerhoff 1989 for ossuaries in Austria; Zilkens 1983 for Germany; Odermatt-Bürgi 1976 for Switzerland), for instance, a keyhole-shaped entrance, but often they were built primarily according to the demands of a specific churchyard.

Ossuaries were integrated into the 'cult' of the poor souls⁸ and for centuries were used in Roman Catholic regions across Europe to pray for (and – even though this was theologically not accepted – also to) the dead. They also served as *memento mori* symbols and a normative representation of a virtuous life. In Protestant regions the secondary burial in ossuaries was criticised during the Reformation, and ossuaries were destroyed or profanised and (especially the larger ones) reused, for example as living quarters for the sexton (as in Staufen), a schoolroom, a prison for vagabonds (in Uster, see Hauser 1994: 58–63) or as a contemporary toilet (Utzenstorf, Switzerland). In Roman Catholic regions, practices surrounding ossuaries arrived at a climax in the 18th century with

⁷ On medieval images, graves were often shown as hip-deep. Today, the coffin is buried at a depth of around 1.6 m in Switzerland.

⁸ The idea, as it was implemented by religious institutions, was to pray for the poor souls of one's relatives in purgatory; but often people also prayed to the poor souls. As a result it appears as a kind of cult. See Zihlmann 1982, 125.

the opulent staging of *memento mori* symbols. In the late 19th and 20th century, more and more ossuaries were closed, including those in Roman Catholic regions, mostly because they supported an 'old-fashioned' idea of Catholicism. In Switzerland today, there are about 45 ossuaries (of more than a few hundred) where bones are still displayed.

A Gender-Specific Analysis of Ossuaries

Ossuaries are part of era-specific mentalities and worldviews (Koudounaris 2011). Therefore, the concepts of gender materialised and visualised in ossuaries, especially through the presentation of the mortal remains of humans and through murals and other paintings (fig. 1; fig. 5–7) reflect the gender norms of those specific times. As a result I consider both, human mortal remains and paintings, as material objects that are culturally produced and integrated in meaning making processes. I will approach both with the same methodological questions, suggesting that the respective examples, dead bodies and artefacts or paintings, give meaning to each other and form part of the concepts of death and normative notions connected to such a conceptual level.

Ossuaries have compellingly expressed, since medieval times and also unto today, the idea of collectivity on a visual level, with gender no longer being the main category of identity or distinction. In the nicely arranged skull walls, such as in Naters (Figure 3A) (Ruppen 1986) or Leuk (Sarbach 1994) in Switzerland, as well as in more chaotic bone collections, such as in Elbigenalp in Austria (Figure 3B) (Schweiger 1967) or Saxon and Bagnes in Switzerland, we find the visually supported normative idea of an egalitarian collective beyond any differentiation by gender. Everyone in this material staging is equal, boys and girls, women and men are joined in death, irrespective of their gender, age, ethnicity or social status. In this setting, the individual is completely subordinated to the collective.

This collective exhibition of bones was, and still is, related to a moral *memento mori* message. It is not important who someone is during their lifetime, how they looked, which status they had, but that they should live a morally and religiously exemplary life. In the ossuary of Elbigenalp this visually expressed idea is underlined textually by a plate on the ossuary with the inscription 'Wer war hier Thor/wer Waiser/wer Bettler/oder Kaiser?' ('Who of them [lying] here was a fool, who wise, who a beggar or emperor?') (Figure 4A). This plate is contemporary, pinned on the iron bars with wire and imitating a past spelling style. The inscription, which reminds us today of the unimportance of intelligence and social status, only functions in combination with the masses of bones and skulls lying there in a seemingly haphazard manner. The *memento mori* motif is connected with a warning to the rich and mighty, as well as the promise of salvation and justice to the poor and marginalised.

In Naters, Villmergen and Alvaschein/Mistail in Switzerland, we find (with some variation) the famous inscription from antiquity 'Was wir sind/das werdet Ihr/was Ihr seid/das waren wir' ('What we are, you will be, what you are, we were') (Figure 4B). The wooden plate in Alvaschein is from the 20th century (while the bones are all pre-20th century). This sentence, again in combination with the masses of skulls and bones, reminds the living of the proximity of death and calls on them from a Catholic perspective to live their life in a virtuous



Figure 3: (A and B) The quantity and visual staging of skulls and bones in Naters, Switzerland (15th century) and Elbigenalp, Austria, support the idea of a collectivity beyond gender differentiations. © Yves Müller.

and religiously exemplary way. Whilst the plate in Elbigenalp questions social inequality, the sentence in Alvaschein stresses the power of death, but both imply an ungendered collectivity.

Accordingly, we could argue that ossuaries establish, even until today, a kind of socially egalitarian and ungendered collectivity. Women and men, rich and poor, wise or fool – all are the same in this material visualisation.

However, at a second glance, we see that this egalitarian concept has been, and continues to be, a normative ideal, itself communicated on a visual and material level. The idea of equality in death is utopic. Justice is projected onto existence in the afterlife, while this world – regardless of the criticism of dominant social norms implied in such ossuaries – is and remains ‘unjust’. Behind the visual staging of egalitarian concepts differentiations on various levels are nonetheless maintained and important. I focus here on two of them, the first a kind of religious inequality, and the second differentiations according to gender. Both are inter-related and especially interesting when looking at visually and materially communicated, dominant norms relating to concepts of death (and the dead) and a correct life in the face of mortality. I mention these persisting concepts of inequality because they construct social norms and behaviours through visual communication. They also show strikingly the limits of subversive ideas of equality.



Figure 4: (A and B) The *memento mori* inscriptions in Elbigenalp, Austria, and Alvaschein/Mistail, Switzerland. © Yves Müller.

First, this collectivity established of skulls and bones is not egalitarian with regard to religious identity, regardless of the fact that it diminishes or ignores gender and social hierarchies. It certainly includes women, men, boys and girls – but only some of them. Only the mortal remains of people who have been baptised – and normally only Roman Catholics – are gathered in ossuaries. The unbaptised, such as stillborn children, are not included. Also, suicide victims and other marginalised persons were not considered a part of this visually staged community of the deceased. The idea behind ossuaries is based on religious inequality and dominant religious norms. Death is, from an emic point of view, only frightening to people who have lived counter to Roman Catholic norms. This is illustrated nicely with the *danse macabre* from the ossuary of Wolhusen (Switzerland), dated around 1661 (Niederberger, Marke and Odermatt-Bürgi 2008). The ossuary is painted with a *danse macabre*, in which the personifications of death are represented with real skulls. While the religious leaders, who have lived according to Catholic norms, are gently led away by the skeletons, the 'sinful' people are forced away with brutality. For example, the innkeeper – this figure is suspect because he entices people to drink and makes money from it – is kicked in his genitals by Death. The profiteer besides him is not only pushed by Death, but also by the devil (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Detail of the *danse macabre* in the ossuary of Wolhusen (Switzerland), mural, 1661. © Yves Müller.

Second, even in the above mentioned ungendered ideas of collectivity, gender remains – often on an implicit and/or secondary level – a relevant category. In the *danse macabre* of Wolhusen, all human beings (and I suppose also the skeletons) are represented as masculine. These figures do not generally represent real people,⁹ but are symbolic stereotypes of social and religious ranks. Thus, according to this worldview, the logical conclusion is that the norm and ideal is masculine, especially if we compare this *danse macabre* with others, where death is personified as female, and female human beings also appear (Figure 2). The same can also be observed in the contemporary inscription in Elbigenalp mentioned above, where the masculine form is used to characterise the social equality of human beings. The idea of masculinity as a norm may seem quite common for European history, but if that is true, then it is surprising that in the majority of representations of purgatory (and hell) on the walls of charnel houses, the condemned are clearly gendered as masculine and feminine. For example, on the wall of the ossuary of Fusio (Ticino), we see men and women in the fire at the feet of the Christ figure (Figure 6A). The women are even more prominent: they are represented as facing the viewer, praying and

⁹ This *danse macabre* includes a baker, an untypical figure for this genre. It is perhaps a reference to the donor or a positive counterpart to the profiteer, see Odermatt-Bürgi 2008: 176.

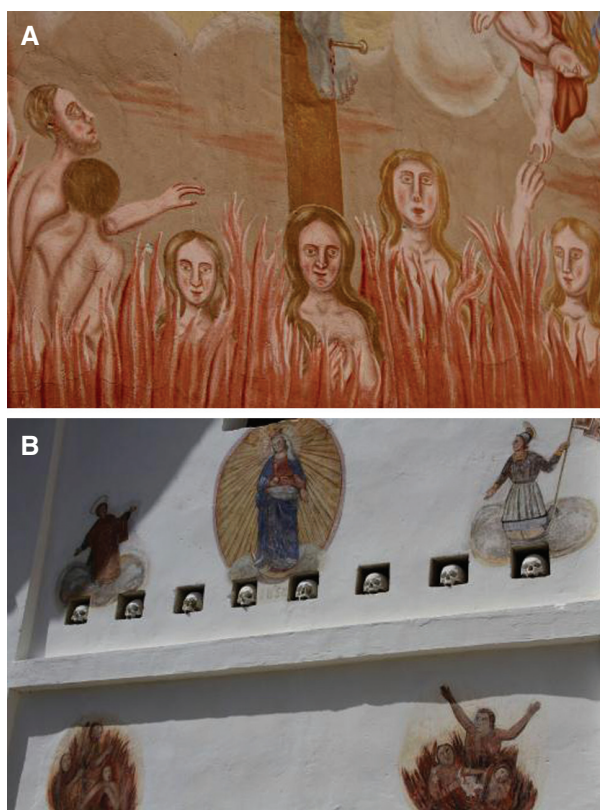


Figure 6: (A and B) The outside walls of the ossuary in Fusio (above) and in Cumbel (Switzerland). © Yves Müller.

smiling in expectation of salvation, while the men are shown from the side or back.

In the ossuary of Cumbel in Grisons, painted in the 19th century, the gendered image of purgatory is combined with an explicit visual promise of salvation, although in general, all ossuaries imply such a promise (Riesebrodt 2007). In Figure 6B, we see two scenes with women and men burning in purgatory. Begging for help, some stretch their arms up to the Virgin Mary, who is placed in the middle above them. Left and right of Mary, Saint Stephanus and Mauritius (with the lance) are shown kneeling and praying for the poor souls. Directly underneath Mary and the saints, we find eight niches with skulls. As a *pars pro toto*, these skulls represent the population of Cumbel. Their proximity to Mary is a visual promise of salvation and rescue from purgatory, and at the same time a reminder to live in a virtuous way. In contrast to the masculine as norm (as in Wolhusen), it is again noticeable that the persons in purgatory are gendered as masculine and feminine. In my opinion, in such purgatory scenes the gendering strengthens the normative implications of the depicted concepts and makes the scene comprehensible on an individual, concrete level. The skulls imply (for non-specialists) an ungendered collective of ‘good’ Catholics who deserve to be buried in the churchyard, while the paintings are a gendered warning to live virtuously.

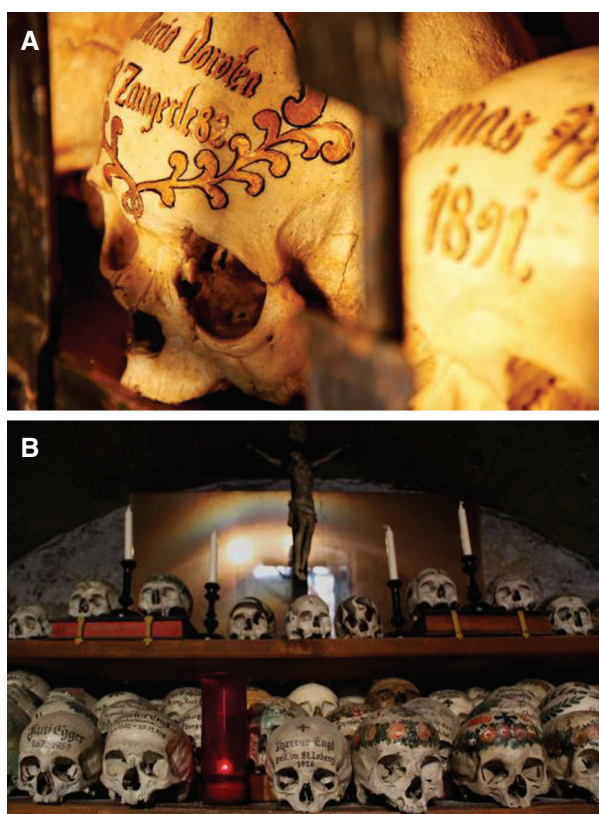


Figure 7: (A and B) The painted skulls of Galtür (above, the left skull is labelled 'Maria Dorotea Zangerle, 1882') and Hallstatt, Austria. © Yves Müller.

Nevertheless, we also find a tradition that individualises the skulls of the deceased collected in ossuaries, primarily by painting them (Koudounaris forthcoming). Especially in parts of Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, name and date of death, sometimes also the profession and/or the individuals place of origin, were inscribed on the cleaned skulls (Figure 7A), or they were painted with decorative elements such as flowers, ornaments or snakes (Figure 7B) (Sörries 2011). The oldest of these painted skulls seem to date back to the 17th century, while the more recent are from the late 20th century.¹⁰ This individualisation is related to a new gendering of the skulls. The gender of the skull is now not only recognisable to anthropologists and other experts, but because of the painting also to laypeople. These painted skulls are part of the ossuary collectivity and the promise of salvation connected to it, and at the same time, they remain gendered individuals, not only before God (to reinforce an emic view), but also in the eyes of humans. This gendering is further reinforced when the whole cadavers are conserved and dressed, as in the catacombs of the Capuchins in Palermo (Cenzi and Vannini 2014). There, the mummies are arranged by gender

¹⁰ In the town of Rain in Germany, we can find a skull that was painted with the date 1601. However, most painted skulls can be dated back to the 19th and early 20th century.

and religious status: there are *inter alia* a corridor of men, a special room only for women, and one for monks. Until the late 19th century, the mummies were dressed every year in new fashionable, gender-specific clothes by their relatives – which also happens to make them interesting examples for historians of dress.

All these practices express the idea that the deceased are not really ‘dead’, but live on as gendered individuals and interact as such with the living. Nevertheless, gender is (mostly) no longer a relevant category for concepts of how one might live on in afterlife worlds. More relevant than the gender of a person is the way he or she lived before death.

Through these examples I want to show the ambiguous role of the visual staging of bones and skulls in ossuaries: on the one hand, their visual displays subversively eliminate gender as a category of distinction between individuals and question gender norms, on the other hand they also introduce and transmit new hierarchies and dichotomies. Partly, ossuaries are still based on the dichotomous gender matrix that sees the masculine as the norm. However, they also support the idea that gender is not the main criteria for coping with death and existence in the afterlife. Thus, from a gender-specific view, we can argue that ossuaries are in-between places. They connect normal and transcendental spaces, life and death, the individual and the collective and they blur ideas of gender; yet at the same time they reproduce and even introduce normative ideas connected to death.

Conclusion: The Normative Dimension of Gendered Death

As we have seen via the example of ossuaries, gender norms do not (even to this day) end with death, but the practices around death can question concepts of gender or strengthen them, depending on context, recipients and the specific historical setting. As a conclusion, I systematise and generalise my observations, underlining the relationship between concepts of gender, death and processes of normativity.

As Angela Berlis wrote, death is always socio-culturally interpreted (Berlis 2014: 66). The dead are (to this day) regarded as not living, but also as not totally gone.¹¹ They are still part of a socio-cultural collective and are in various ways bound to social interactions, norms and regulations. The interpretation of death has a normative basis, as I have shown through the analysis of the ossuaries: death is interpreted according to socio-cultural norms and expectations towards (often, the ‘good’) life; categories of gender and concepts of death are connected to norms, regulations and hierarchies, with the material and visual supporting or questioning such regulations. Based on my observations above, it is possible to differentiate processes of normativity connected with death and gender and communicated through material and visual media. It is worth noting that these dimensions of the relationship between material representations

¹¹ In this case we are talking about socio-cultural practices around graves and the norms regarding the ‘respect towards the deceased’. For example, during our fieldwork, in some ossuaries we could not get permission to take pictures of the murals while a corpse was laid out – even if no mourner was present (and we did not disturb someone) and if the corpse could not be seen in the pictures.

of death, normative processes and gender concepts, are not mutually exclusive, but interact with each other. The following dimensions form different views on the complex interrelation between gender, death, and norms around them.

We can find norms that *mirror and reproduce* socio-cultural regulations of gender. In this article, I focused on the material level of such a reproduction, for example as we can see in the gendered painting of skulls (Figure 7). Today some ossuaries are used as chapels where dead bodies are laid out before they are buried. In this preparation for burial a dead woman is, on this material level of the staging of the dead, clothed and coiffed in a different way than a dead man, a boy differently from a girl. Here, norms concerning beauty are carried over beyond death. These norms mirror common beauty trends and fashion styles, even if funeral gowns for the deceased are cut in a specific way (as is still the case today). In such cases norms regarding the living are extended to be valid also for the deceased.

Connected with such normative processes are other ones that *create* socio-cultural regulations regarding gender. This 'creation' is not a generation of something new, but an adaption and reshaping of older norms. On a conceptual level, the gendered personification of death is connected with normative claims towards the living, as we have seen above (Figures 5 and 6). The formation and representation of the idea of a *memento mori* concept and a virtuous life is specific for an era and culture, but also depends on ideas of gender. In European history, to live a religiously perfect life meant something different for a man than for a woman, and also something different for a widow, a married woman with or without children and a virgin. This is visually represented in the *danse macabre* motif, where the living are shown with class and gender-stereotypical clothing, gestures or contexts (Figure 2).

In these examples, the visualisation of death offers a matrix to shape lifestyles and worldviews; it creates gender-specific norms for an ideal life. In this case, death is not a normative extension of life, but these visualised concepts of death become a framework for regulations that rule the living.

At the same time, as we have seen, the visualisation of death can also *question* socio-cultural regulations. The staging of skulls and bones in ossuaries challenges social hierarchies (Figures 3 and 4), as well as social differences between genders. In death neither gender nor economic difference, neither beauty nor social status are relevant, but one's way of life and religious merit. As a result, charnel houses such as Elbigenalp (Figures 3B and 4A) or *danse macabre* motifs (Figure 2) can also be used to pass criticism on socio-political occurrences. Such visualisations can negate gender hierarchies and question traditional gendered power structures on a material and psychological level. Ideas and visualisations of death can also have a subversive character.

The visual representation of gender concepts and ungendered ideas supported by material objects (such as ossuaries) needs to be understood in respect to meaning-making processes. These processes serve for the individual as orientation or guide for social interactions. For a collectivity, normative processes are an important part of the 'social construction of reality', the socially shared stock of common knowledge that serves as a bond underlying human interactions and is represented in traditions, customs, institutions, behaviour and so on (Berger and Luckmann 2000). In this construction of reality, gender as a concept seems to be so important for social orientation that it does not end with death, but shapes practices and ideas around death. In other words: ideas of

death in western cultures have to deal with gender concepts (and reproduce, construct or question them) because gender is seen as the basis of normatively constructed 'reality'.

References

- Berger, Peter L. and Luckmann, Thomas. 1979. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Berlis, Angela. 2014. 'Zeichenhaftes Sterben: Deutungen des Todes von Frauen und Männern am Beispiel des Martyriums', in Silvia Schroer (ed.), *Sensenfrau und Klagemann: Sterben und Tod mit Gendervorzeichen*, Zürich: TVZ, 53–70.
- Cenzi, Ivan and Vannini, Carlo. 2014. *La veglia eternal: Catacombe dei Cappuccini di Palermo/The Eternal Vigil: The Capuchin Catacombs in Palermo*, Modena: Logos edizione.
- Du Gay, Paul et al. 1997. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, London: Sage.
- Feldmann, Klaus. 1997. *Sterben und Tod: Sozialwissenschaftliche Theorien und Forschungsergebnisse*, Opladen: Leske & Budrich.
- Gilhus, Ingvild Saelid. 2011. 'The Non-Confessional Study of Religion and Its Normative Dimensions', in Olav Henriksen (ed.), *Difficult Normativity: Normative Dimensions in Research on Religion and Theology*, Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 95–107.
- Goffman, Erwin. 2006. *Asyle: Über die soziale Situation psychiatrischer Patienten und anderer Insassen*, Stuttgart: Suhrkamp.
- Guthke, Karl S. 1997. *Ist der Tod eine Frau?: Geschlecht und Tod in Kunst und Literatur*, München: Beck.
- Hertz, Robert. 1905/1906. 'Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort', *L'Année sociologique* 10, 48–137.
- Hoefer, Natascha N. 2010. *Schwermut und Schönheit: Als die Menschen Trauer trugen*, Düsseldorf: Fachverlag des Deutschen Bestattungsgewerbes.
- Jansen, Nils and Oestmann, Peter (eds.). 2011. *Gewohnheit. Gebot. Gesetz: Normativität in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Eine Einführung*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Kahl, Antje. 2014. 'Zum Bedeutungswandel des toten Körpers in der Medizin', in Christian Hoffstadt et al. (eds.), *Der Tod in Kultur und Medizin*, Bochum and Freiburg: Project Verlag, 11–24.
- Koudounaris, Paul. 2011. *The Empire of Death: A Cultural History of Ossuaries and Charnel Houses*, London: Thames and Hudson.
- Koudounaris, Paul. Forthcoming. 'Vom Berg Athos nach Stans: Ursprünge und Verbreitung der Schädelbemalung in Europa', in Yves Müller and Anna-Katharina Höpflinger (eds.), *Ossarium: Beinhäuser der Schweiz*, Zürich: Pano.
- LeGuin, Ursula. 2007 [1969]. *The Left Hand of Darkness*, London: Orbit.
- McGuire, Meredith. 1990. 'Religion and the Body: Rematerializing the Human Body in the Social Sciences of Religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29:3, 283–296.
- Morgan, David. 2010. 'Introduction: The Matter of Belief', in David Morgan (ed.), *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*, London: Routledge, 1–18.
- Niederberger, Claus, Marke, Doreen and Odermatt-Bürgi, Regula. 2008. *Totentanz: Beinhaus/Totenkapelle Wolhusen*, Luzern: Kantonale Denkmalpflege.
- O'Connor, Rory C. and Sheehy, Noel P. 1997. 'Suicide and Gender', *Mortality* 2, 239–254.
- Odermatt-Bürgi, Regula. 1976. *Beinhäuser: Geschichte – Architektur – Funktion: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Innerschweizer Beinhäuser*, Zürich: n.p.
- Odermatt-Bürgi, Regula. 2008. 'Der Totentanz von Wolhusen', in Claus Niederberger, Doreen Marke and Regula Odermatt-Bürgi (eds.), *Totentanz: Beinhaus/Totenkapelle Wolhusen*, Luzern: Kantonale Denkmalpflege, 171–176.

- Orsi, Robert. 2007. 'When 2+2=5', *The American Scholar*, accessed 16 November 2014, <http://theamericanscholar.org/when-2-2-5/>.
- Patterson, Orlando. 1982. *Slavery and Social Death – a Comparative Study*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Riesebrodt, Martin. 2007. *Cultus und Heilsversprechen: Eine Theorie der Religionen*, München: Beck.
- Rose, Gillian. 2012. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, London: Sage.
- Ruppen, Walter. 1986. 'Der Fund im Beinhaus von Naters', *Journal of Swiss Archeology and Art History* 43, 181–186.
- Sarbach, Josef. 1994. *Beinhaus Leuk*, Visp: Mengis Verlag.
- Schroer, Silvia (ed.). 2014. *Sensenfrau und Klagemann: Sterben und Tod mit Gendervorzeichen*, Zürich: TVZ.
- Schweiger, Helmut. 1967. *Das Beinhaus in Elbigenalp*, München: n.p.
- Sörries, Reiner. 2005. '"Kirchhof" oder Coemeterium? Anmerkungen zum mittelalterlichen Friedhof, zu den Sonderfriedhöfen und zur Auslagerung vor die Stadt', in Norbert Fischer and Markwart Herzog (eds.), *Nekropolis: Der Friedhof als Ort der Toten und der Lebenden*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 23–34.
- Sörries, Reiner. 2011. 'Bemalte Totenschädel: Eine bemerkenswerte Form der Memorialkultur in den süddeutschen und westösterreichischen Beinhäusern', in Alfried Wiczorek and Wilfried Rosendahl (eds.), *Schädelkult: Kopf und Schädel in der Kulturgeschichte des Menschen*, Regensburg: Schnell und Steiner, 257–261.
- Sudnow, David. 1973. *Organisiertes Sterben: Eine soziologische Untersuchung*, Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer.
- Taylor, Lou. 1983. *Mourning Dress: Costume and Social History*, London: Georg Allan & Unwin.
- Westerhoff, Wolfgang. 1989. *Karner in Österreich und Südtirol*, St. Pölten and Wien: Verlag Niederösterreichisches Pressehaus.
- Zihlmann, Josef. 1982. *Wie sie heimgingen*, Hitzkirch: Comenius.
- Zilkens, Stephan. 1983. *Karner-Kapellen in Deutschland: Untersuchungen zur Baugeschichte und Ikonographie doppelgeschossiger Beinhaus-Kapellen*, Köln: Klekamp.